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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002613

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES ELECTIONS, MASSACRE, AND
BILATERAL TIES WITH INTERIOR SECRETARY PUNO

REF: MANILA 2448 (CLAN VIOLENCE)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a December 21 farewell call on Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno, the Ambassador stressed U.S. neutrality in upcoming Philippine elections, interest in accountability for the recent massacre in Maguindanao province, and appreciation for Philippine cooperation in law enforcement matters. Puno discussed his shock on learning of the scope of the Ampatuan clan's accumulation of wealth and weaponry. He expressed deep appreciation for training and assistance from the FBI and Regional Security Office, as well as for intelligence cooperation, and he shared thoughts on future areas on which we might focus training. Puno said he worried about election mechanics, but he saw progress in some efforts to ensure a peaceful election environment. He discussed leading presidential candidates as well as the negative impact on the government when key cabinet members resign to stand for election. End Summary.

MAGUINDANAO

¶2. (C) The Ambassador on December 21 paid a farewell call on Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno. The Ambassador thanked Puno for his cooperation and the insights he had shared with her, most recently during discussions of the massacre in Maguindanao province (reftel). Puno said the cabinet had been genuinely shocked by the amount of wealth and weaponry that Maguindanao's Ampatuan clan had accumulated. Although Puno acknowledged it was common knowledge that the Ampatuans had a sizeable militia, the government had not known, for example, that this militia maintained four tanks. Puno also related that, on a visit to the United States, at least one leading member of the Ampatuan family had been delayed at the American port of entry for bringing 200,000 USD in cash.

¶3. (C) The Ampatuans had been expanding their influence well beyond Maguindanao province, Puno related. The clan had been providing financial backing to candidates running in the Jolo and Basilan gubernatorial elections, among others. Puno believed the accumulation of power and impunity by the Ampatuans reflected poorly on the governance capacity of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

¶4. (C) Puno explained that the Armed Forces of the Philippines continued to pursue 300-400 armed followers of the Ampatuans. He said the government had taken an unpopular

step by transferring police officials under Ampatuan influence from their posts, and it had been difficult to find a non-Ampatuan who was willing to serve as Acting Governor, because many feared possible retaliation by the clan. He observed that current Acting Governor Nariman Ambolodto was actually from Shariff Kabunsuan, an area that had split from Maguindanao in 2006 before being reincorporated in 2008, and her roots might make it difficult for her to retain support from the local population for her service as Acting Governor.

¶15. (C) The Ambassador said she was closely following the security situation in Maguindanao, and the Embassy was reviewing ways in which it might be able to provide further development assistance there. Puno welcomed the prospect of further USG efforts on behalf of the people of Maguindanao. The Ambassador encouraged the government to focus on ensuring speedy and fair trials of those responsible for the massacre.

Puno promised that the Department of Justice was taking the trials seriously and the cases would be handled in a transparent manner.

ELECTIONS

¶16. (C) Puno said that the May 2010 elections would pose a tremendous challenge to the government. He worried about the functionality of machines to be used for automated vote tabulation, and about the lack of voter education to date. He also believed there was a significant possibility of violence during the election. Puno said he hoped that Filipinos would either surrender or register their

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privately-owned firearms in advance of the elections, and he cited the relative success of the Jolo Governor Abdusakur Tan in this effort.

¶17. (C) President Arroyo would easily win the congressional seat she was seeking, Puno predicted. In the presidential race, Puno supported the administration-backed candidacy of Gilberto Teodoro, but he said that the other front-runners (Senators Aquino and Villar) were also serious, credible figures. The Ambassador stressed that the USG was entirely neutral in the coming election but did care about the process, and she encouraged Puno to exert whatever influence he could to help ensure free, fair, and peaceful elections.

CABINET DYNAMICS

¶18. (C) Puno worried about the prospect of cabinet resignations in the near future, as some cabinet members would leave by March at the latest to engage in campaigning. He was particularly worried about the loss of presidential Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap, and Presidential Management Staff Chief Hermogenes Esperon. These were influential advisors of President Arroyo who significantly helped to keep the government functioning. Once they were to leave office, their deputies would not be able to fill their shoes.

¶19. (C) Tangentially, Puno characterized Secretary of National Defense Norberto Gonzales as a poor choice for his job. In Puno's view, Gonzales had inadequate experience to run a large agency, was inconsistent, had a poor rapport with leading members of the armed forces, and had "odd" political views. Nevertheless, President Arroyo liked Gonzales, Puno admitted.

COLLABORATION WITH THE USG

¶110. (C) Puno expressed great appreciation for the wide range of support his Department had received from the USG, specifically citing the efforts of the FBI and the Regional Security Office, as well as U.S.-Philippine

intelligence-sharing. The Ambassador cited the recent arrest of Abu Sayyaf Group figure Abdul Basir Latip as an example of close U.S.-Philippine cooperation and also discussed U.S. work with the Philippine National Police (PNP) in the aftermath of natural disasters, as well as U.S. assistance in creating model police stations around the country.

¶11. (C) Puno acknowledged the Philippines could not have a better partner than the United States. He expressed satisfaction with efforts to date to modernize the PNP but said more work remained to be done. He praised FBI technical training but added the PNP would benefit from further training in crime scene investigation, as well as in judicial matters, police/prosecutor cooperation, and combating trafficking in persons. He agreed with the Ambassador on the necessity of ensuring that the PNP selected the proper officials for training, and of promoting human rights.

KENNEY